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COLOR AND ITS KINSHIP TO SOUND

Address before the Rembrandt Club of Brooklyn

By LOUIS C. TIFFANY

YOU may readily understand that a request to address you comes with double force because, on the one hand, of your name—that of the great master of painting—and on the other of your habitat. For I, too, am a Long Islander. Brooklyn was one of the very first spots settled by Hollanders on this side of the ocean and the settlers were always in touch with Amsterdam where Rembrandt passed the greatest part of his life. Haarlem-Leyden-Amsterdam, that tripolis of the Netherlands—how much that is worthy of the noble art of painting do we owe to them! That small section of a little country—how much its artists have done to uphold the banner of color! and to prove that, after all, in *painting* it is color that must always last!

But what you want from me is not the history of art or the antiquities of the Dutch and of Long Island. You want me to talk a little about my own experience as an artist and you must have your way.

At present the main body of my work deals with a very brittle matter, namely glass; but the fragility of glass does not interfere with a great capacity for beauty on its part. I do not think that we often remember that glass as a vehicle for beauty has a past quite as venerable as that of other mediums, if not in the form of windows, yet in that of useful and decorative objects. And when glass was first used about the Mediterranean it was accompanied by color.

When first I had a chance to travel in the East and to paint where the people and the buildings also are clad in beautiful hues, the pre-eminence of color in the world was brought forcibly to my attention. I returned to New York wondering why we made so little use of our eyes, why we refrained so obstinately from taking advantage of color in our architecture and our clothing when Nature indicates its mastership, when, by its use under the rules of taste, we can extend our innocent pleasure and have more happiness in life, at the same time adding to the happiness of our neighbor.

This reluctance to enjoy what is natural and beneficent, which is found among most of the northern Europeans and Americans, makes it hard to introduce any warmth among us . . . but let me return to my own cause.

When I got back to work at home and wanted to decorate my studio and home, I was confronted amongst other problems with the question: What was to be done for the windows? since all windows were poor in quality and color! I then perceived that the glass used for claret bottles and preserve jars was richer, finer, had a more beautiful quality in color-vibrations than any glass I could buy.

So I set to puzzling out this curious matter and found that the glass from which bottles are made contains the Oxides of Iron and other impurities which are left in the sand when that is melted. Now to extract it is costly; and so the glass-man left them there, without in the least realizing that his neglect made for beauty—and the substances he did not purge out were the very cause of that richness in the glass that I found beautiful! Refining the pot-metal only made weak, uninteresting glass!

Here I met, however, the prejudice and mental habits of glassmakers. So I took up chemistry, built furnaces—two of them were destroyed by fire—and for some time my experiments met with no success. But little by little I made some steps that encouraged me. Year by year the experiments that baffled hope gave way to better results; and so, in the course of time, through hard work and with the assistance of others, I have reached the point where it is possible to produce any color and any lustre that may be required.

Naturally I was attracted to the old glass in windows of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which have always seemed to me the finest ever! Their rich tones are due in part to the use of pot-metal full of impurities, and in part to the uneven thickness of the glass, but still more because the glassmakers of that day abstained from the use of paint.

They had the few colors they needed in the glass itself, and that was enough.

Later the temptation to help out with paint was the beginning of deterioration in glass windows from the standpoint of art. It was necessary to struggle against this habit of makers of glass windows, which is still practised in Europe. By the aid of studies in chemistry and through years of experiments I have found means to avoid the use of surface-painting of glass, so that now it is possible to produce figures in glass of which even the flesh tones are not superficially treated!

In Christ Church in your Borough you should examine the big window to see the proof of my statement; the heads therein are built up of what I call "genuine" glass, genuine because there are no tricks of the glassmaker needed to express the flesh.

Many of you who have not turned any particular attention to the secrets of glassmaking may be surprized at the emphasis I give to this point; but those who have had the time to look into such matters, will understand the importance of the step taken. At Laurelton Hall near Oyster Bay I have a nude figure in glass which has no surface paint or etched parts to express the flesh, while the garments of other figures in the same composition are rendered by the artful adjustment of glass in different thicknesses. Some day I hope to have the pleasure of welcoming this worshipful company at Laurelton—it is only about twenty-five miles from here—when you can satisfy yourselves that I am not indulging in exaggeration. This is one of the most important advances in modern colored windows.

"Nature is always right"—that is a saying we often hear from the past; and here is another: "Nature is always beautiful" . . . but when some one dares to say that on the contrary "Nature is rarely right—and to such an extent even, that it almost might be said that Nature is usually wrong" then the people who love Nature and are striving to follow her lead become disgusted and more than angry.

We read a great deal, and we hear it supported in the present, to the effect that all that is in

Nature, all that we see and feel, is expressed to our senses by form or by lines. These discriminators between color and line put color in the background to play the second fiddle. They stoutly maintain that it is false doctrine to say that color is superior to line, a doctrine set up and defended by certain men of the early nineteenth century who are called the Romantics. Nay, some go so far as to say that the doctrine of the superiority of color to form is one concerning which you have to laugh—in order not to weep!

That is a very bad situation, is it not? But allow me to suggest an alternative, namely, to neither laugh nor weep, but just bravely consider the claims of the triumphant and cocksure Formists and the timid suggestions put forward by a humble believer in Color!

It is curious, is it not, that line and form disappear at a short distance, while color remains visible at a much longer? It is fairly certain—isn't it?—that the eyes of children at first see only colored surfaces—the breast and face of the mother, the head of the father, a colored ball or apple, the nodding crest of Hektor in Troy! Color and movement, *not* form, are our earliest impressions when babies. Insects are attracted by color (*not* form) when in search of food. For that very reason flowers develop color, because they must have the visits of insects to reproduce their kind. And if the plant has flowers that require a visit from a moth or night-flying beetle, why, then it produces—not a pink or blue blossom, which would not “carry” in the dark, but white or pale-yellow petals that call the favoring insect out of the night sky.

The Orientals have been teaching the Occidentals how to use colors for the past 10,000 years or so. Their textiles especially have been important parts of the commerce they drove with the fierce barbarians, who *muttered* and *murmured* and *stuttered* and *jabbered* incomprehensible tongues on a hundred seacoasts. In fact, *barbar* is only one of many words invented to imitate the sound of a language unknown to those who traded into foreign parts. The men of the East who supplied barbarians with rugs and figured textiles considered color first, and form only incidentally. Their designs were spots or tracts of color, and during the course of time they learned through reasoning and instinct that a fine design can be spoiled if the wrong combinations and juxtaposition of colors are chosen. We have to discover, as they did, what marvelous power one color has over another, and what the relative size of each different tract of color means to the result—what the mass of each different color means for the effect of the design as a whole!

Take a textile of Oriental make or a wall-hanging: It is fine according as the color-masses or spots are well selected and properly placed in relation one to the other. Take, on the other hand, a European textile or wall-paper where shaded flowers are introduced to enhance the design—and what a hideous result do we get for that rug or textile or wall-hanging!

Now apply the same argument to stained glass! Take a glass window of the Thirteenth Century—do we not see at once that Color is of the first importance there? With regard to the painting of flowers—there again Color is of the first importance. In many flowers their form is distinctly

a secondary consideration, which comes after the satisfaction we feel in their colors—those hues that glow and flicker and strike the sight like the embers, the little many-colored jets and the steadier flames of a drift-wood fire.

Let us take colors as the component parts in decoration. We must have a combination of the physical and mental in a fine decoration—the objective and the subjective must be married and intimately blended by the subtle employment of color, as the composer employs the moods of music.

The sovereign importance of Color is only beginning to be realized in modern times. Some people, unfortunate people, are really color-blind without their knowing it. Many more are deficient in the sense for color—and know it not. Only a few have combined with an inborn color-sense the chance to study and develop this original gift, which is given to many persons in their cradles, but is neglected afterward and even educated out of them. During childhood form is the second thing seen and form is soon made so important that color dwindles and its charm is forgot in the rush and struggle of new impressions, new ideas. It seems to me that education should strive to keep alive this primal natural instinct and never allow human beings to forget or neglect what will always prove in after life a source of pure enjoyment such as we may imagine to be one of the delights of those beings of another world—who mayhap shall surpass the measure of human kind!

Light is composed of vibrations of differing wavelengths, each vibration giving a different color; when all vibrate together, the result is white light. Were it not for these vibrations, what form, what lines could be seen? We could then only *feel* form, detect shape by the tactile sense. Let us consider now, whether those reasoners are correct who allot a secondary place to Color.

To-day we are beginning to realize that these light-vibrations have a subjective power and affect the mind and soul, producing feelings and ideas of their own in the recipient brain. Light and sound are being studied in correlation, so that those who have developed the color-sense to a high degree can experience a correspondingly delicate perception in the realm of *sound*; and vice-versa, those who are delicately versed in *sound* can experience the finer impressions of the sense of *sight*. Instruments are being invented to prove by demonstration the subtle connection that exists between the two senses of *color* and *sound*.

Thus, photography is the image produced on sensitive surfaces by white light. Now, separate this white light into *component colors*, and we have color-photography.

And now to close: We are all at work toward the same ideal, which is—Beauty. That same Beauty is what Nature has lavished upon us as a Supreme Gift—it is all about us to see and use. Copying what others have done helps us indeed to exercise our eyes; but merely to copy and not to employ our imagination—is to strangle our talent, our heritage! Styles are merely the copying of what others have done, perhaps done better than we. God has given us our talents, not to copy the talents of others, but rather to use our brains and imagination in order to obtain the revelation of True Beauty!

Louis C. Tiffany